The Free-Flowing White Salmon River Returns

The White Salmon Working Group Restores a River

The breaching of Condit Dam has returned the White Salmon River to a free-flowing state for the first time in nearly 100 years. (Credit: Andy Maser and Steve Stampfli)

Condit Dam Breached

On October 26, 2011, the White Salmon River, a Columbia River tributary near White Salmon, WA, flowed freely for the first time in nearly a century when PacifiCorp breached Condit Dam. By August 2012, the dam will be fully decommissioned, allowing access to 33 miles of habitat for salmon and steelhead protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), Pacific lamprey, ESA-listed bull trout, and several other fish species. Built in 1913 for hydroelectric generation, Condit Dam is one of the nation's tallest dams (125 feet) to be decommissioned and was a barrier to all migrating fish since construction. The Service was a part of the original 1999 settlement agreement signed by PacifiCorp and 23 federal and state agencies, tribes, and non-governmental organizations to decommission the Condit Hydroelectric Project starting October 1, 2006.

The White Salmon Working Group

The White Salmon Working Group formed in 2005 to formulate options for protecting, conserving, and restoring White Salmon River wild salmon before, during, and after Condit Dam's breach.

Members of the multi-agency White Salmon Working Group. (Credit: Casey Risley/USFWS)

Working Group members include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Geological Survey, the Yakama Nation, and PacifiCorp, which owns Condit Dam. For the past six years the Working Group has collaborated on projects such as permitting, fish passage projects, monitoring adult and juvenile salmonid populations, habitat restoration, capturing and relocating Endangered Species Act-listed tule fall Chinook upstream to protect spawning fish, and restoring the White Salmon River fish populations upstream of Condit Dam.

A free-flowing White Salmon River will facilitate recovery efforts for ESA-listed fish species (Credit: USFWS)

Service Fisheries biologist Jeff Jolley with a returning White Salmon River tule fall Chinook salmon (Credit: USFWS)

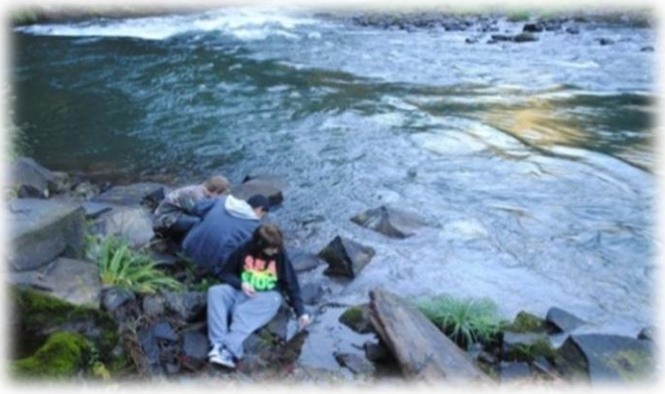
Why The White Salmon is Important

The White Salmon River Basin has long been a priority Service watershed given its proximity to several of our National Fish Hatcheries and its potential to support recovery for three ESA-listed fall Chinook salmon, steelhead and coho salmon. Spring Creek NFH has raised tule fall Chinook that originate from the White Salmon River for 110 years, enabling fish harvest to continue for more than a century while safeguarding the genetic lineage of this unique salmon run. Service biologists at the Washington Fish and Wildlife Office have been engaged since the 1990's with PacifiCorp and other stakeholders on hydropower relicensing negotiations and consultations on priority species such as bull trout. In 2011, the Service's Columbia River Fisheries Program Office spearheaded in-stream capture and transport efforts to relocate 679 adult tule Chinook upstream so their fall spawning would be unaffected by the October dam breach. The White Salmon River is important to the Yakama Nation, and the Service will continue working with it and other partners to restore the Basin's fisheries and habitat.

Community and Cultural Connections, Youth Education

The return of a free-flowing White Salmon River has profound spiritual and cultural significance for the Yakama Nation, whose people have harvested fish and berries in the Basin for millennia. Recognizing and the impact removal of Condit Dam and will have on nearby communities, the Yakama Nation Fisheries Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group initiated the White Salmon River Experiential Learning Project. The Project educates local students about the history of Condit Dam and Northwestern Lake prior to its removal in October 2011.

The Project provides students with a balanced view of the choices and compromises involved in natural resource decisions and dam removal, and promote analytical thinking about the important questions surrounding removal of Condit Dam and other natural resource issues. Working Group partners conducted in-class presentations on the past, present and future of the White Salmon River and Condit Dam, and helped students conduct water quality monitoring and habitat surveys prior to dam breaching. These efforts, as well as habitat restoration involving Project students and volunteers, will continue after complete dam removal in August 2012.



Students conducting water quality testing on the White Salmon River (Credit: Cheri Anderson/USFWS)

Learn More About On-the-Ground Restoration Efforts

Watch a video on the White Salmon Working Group or visit our websites:

USFWS Pacific Region Division of Fishery Resources Condit Dam website;

USFWS Washington Fish and Wildlife Office Condit Dam website